

Jordan River

Parkway

Zitah Lake to

Great Salt Lake

Many dams face 1992 relicensing

By BILL SCHULZ

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American sportsmen have a unique chance over the next few months to get back some of the hunting, fishing, rafting and canoeing lost to hydroelectric power in the 20th century. 1-23-92

"Dams are clean, there are no plumes of smoke rising from them, but they have destroyed rivers, habitat, fisheries and opportunities for whitewater sportsmen," said Randy Showstack of American Rivers, a Washington-based conservation group.

The chance is relicensing for hundreds of dams which operate under licenses granted as much as half a century ago.

The licenses for 231 dams on 105 rivers expire next year with licenses for 100 more expiring by the end of the century.

"We're not asking that these dams be torn out — with a few exceptions," Showstack said by telephone from Washington.

"We're asking that they be operated in a more environment-friendly manner."

Here is a list of states with the number of hydropower projects whose licenses expire in 1993.

New York, 43; Wisconsin, 34; Maine, 29; Michigan, 28; Vermont, 16; Minnesota, 15; Georgia, 10; New Hampshire and Virginia, 9; Massachusetts, 7; Washington, 6; South Carolina, 5; Oregon, Utah and Colorado, 3; Alabama, Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, North Carolina and West Virginia, 2, and California, Montana and Maryland, 1.

One dam American Rivers wants torn out is the Edwards Dam, built on Maine's Kennebec River.

It's located near the mouth of the river in Augusta, Maine, and blocks upstream fish passage.

"It has destroyed a river that once was full of Atlantic salmon, shad, alewives and striped bass," Showstack said.

While tearing out a large dam sounds a bit wild-eyed, Maine Gov. John McKernan has said he wants the state to buy the dam, tear it out and restore the Kennebec.

There are about 60,000 dam sites in the United States. They impound 600,000 miles, or 17 percent, of the country's rivers, American Rivers said. There are 2,010 hydropower projects which produce nearly 10 percent of the country's electricity.

Most dams need only minor alteration, or simply changes in operating patterns, that will cost only 1 percent of dam revenues, American Rivers said.

"Many of these dams operate for peak power production," Showstack said, "meaning at times there's a great flood of water into the river below and at other times only a trickle."

"You can imagine little or nothing survives in those downstream waters."

Other dams need fish ladders to allow salmon, trout, striped bass and other species access to spawning grounds. Dams block those routes at times when states and the federal government are spending millions of dollars to stock trout and restore populations of striped bass and both Atlantic and Pacific salmon.

Some salmon populations are in danger of extinction, in part because of dams blocking the path to their breeding grounds in the headwaters of streams.

In the Pacific Northwest alone, dams block access by salmon and steelhead to almost 5,000 miles of river in the Columbia River basin, according to American Rivers' statistics. That's 30 percent of the original habitat area in the basin.

American Rivers wants screens or other systems installed to prevent that mass slaughter of a valuable resource, Showstack said.